



Karl G. Prasse. *The Tuaregs: The Blue People.* Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1995. 85 pp. \$34.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-87-7289-313-6.



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The Tuaregs: The Blue People

The Tuareg: The Blue People is a fairly recent addition to the English language literature on the Tuareg. Written by Karl-G. Prasse, professor of linguistics at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, it was translated from the Danish by Poul Tornøe and published by the Museum Tusculanum Press. It includes black and white and color photographs and maps. The photographs are by Mr. J. Olsen, Mr. Ghabdouane Mohamed, Professor Ida Nicolaisen, Mr. Morten Kuni and Ms. Ingrid Poulsen and from the Archives of the Ethnographical Collection of the Danish National Museum.

The Tuareg are semi-nomadic pastoralist people of North African Berber origins, who once controlled the caravan trade routes across the Sahara. The Tuareg are nominal Muslims, they speak a Berber language called *Tamashegh*, and read and write the *tifinagh* script related to ancient Libyan ones.

The book is an introduction to Tuareg culture, social structure, and history with an “emphasis on the period after independence” (p. 7). Prasse provides a general English language summary on the political situation the Tuareg face today. The book has eight sections.

The author begins with a survey of the different Tuareg groups and the physical environments they inhabit. The Tuareg number approximately 1,200,000 to 1,300,000 people.[1] Prasse presents the Tuareg groups by country [2], e.g., Niger, Mali, Algeria and Libya. The largest group lives in Niger and includes the Kel Azawagh (or Eastern Iwellemmedan), the Kel Ayr and the Kel Geres. The Tuareg who live in Mali include the Kel Adghagh (or Adrar), the Kel Ensar (formerly Kel Tadamakat), and the Western Iwellemmedan. The Kel Ahaggar and the Kel Ajjer live in southern Algeria, and some Kel Ajjer live in Libya near the Algerian frontier. Other groups are the Udalan Tuareg living in northern Burkina Faso and the Tuareg formerly from Niger now living in Nigeria. Prasse also mentions the neighboring groups who live in these areas.

The Tuareg have never formed a homogeneous whole. Rather, they are grouped into politically autonomous federations which are broadly divided into northern and southern groups. The Tuareg use their group names. A supreme chief (or *amenokal*) who has legal authority but little power today (p. 12) rules each

federation. In the second section, Prasse addresses Tuareg social structure. It is divided between a noble class and tributary and marginal classes, including religious leaders and smiths. The formerly servile groups are now living as tributary groups (p. 19), and the Harratin (or Izeggaghan) live in the oasis towns and are principally gardeners. The distribution of work is changing today, and members of the noble class are taking on duties formerly carried out by the tributary groups (p. 17).

The third section describes the daily life of the Tuareg. Their routines are dictated by domestic chores and by the needs of their cattle (p. 22). The Tuareg diet consists of millet porridge, milk, rice, wheat and grains. Meat is principally eaten on special occasions (p. 23). Social life includes courtship gatherings (known as the *ahal*) and the *tende* or musical gatherings. Relationships between individuals follow strict etiquette. In more recent years the traditional reserve which has always characterized Tuareg social and public behavior is starting to disappear. It is not uncommon, for example, to see young Tuareg men without a veil (pp. 26-27).

In the following section, "Tuareg Culture and Traditional Literature," Prasse discusses the richness of Tuareg literature and oral traditions. These include poetry of all genres, folktales, proverbs and riddles. Often, during evening gatherings discussions on proper wording and the correct use of language arise (p. 30). This cultural heritage is the realm of women. They teach their children the proverbs and the *tifnagh* alphabet, and they play the *imzad* (a one stringed violin). The *tifnagh* alphabet is principally used to write messages and inscriptions and was never used to record epic poetry (pp. 31-32). [3] Prasse also mentions the literacy campaigns (in which he participated in 1966) in Mali and in Niger [4], and the work carried out by missionaries, who collected folktales and lexical material. [5]

Celebrations and festivals are the subject of the fifth section. Tuareg lifestages are punctuated with small gatherings held for the immediate family. Weddings, on the other hand, are large celebrations. Tuareg women usually marry between the ages of fifteen and twenty, and men marry between their late twenties and thirty. Divorces are frequent (p. 37). The author describes a wedding ceremony from the Ayr region of Niger and notes that the bridewealth symbolizes a bond insuring children will be cared for in case of death or divorce (p. 39). The most important annual festival is the Cure Salee (or salt cure) which takes place near InGal in Niger (p. 47). This is when families reunite, news is exchanged,

and dancing and poetry recitals take place.

Tuareg economy has always been based on livestock breeding, on agriculture and on trade. The taxing of caravans crossing the Sahara, slavery, and raiding on neighboring groups stopped during the colonial period. Salt remains an important commodity and, along with dates, it is bartered with millet and cloth bought in southern areas (p. 48). The droughts which occurred in the 1970s and 1980s have obliged many Tuareg to become sedentary. In more recent times, tourism has contributed to the economy. The uranium mines in Arlit have provided work for some members of the Tuareg community, and a gypsum mine is being exploited near Tessalit in Mali. According to the author, however, the most viable mode of life in many Tuareg areas continues to be nomadism (p. 51).

The seventh section discusses history since independence. Prasse has organized this section by country (Algeria, Mali and Niger) and explains the historical developments that led to the political problems occurring today. This subject is treated in great detail in recent French language works by Bernus, Bourgeot, Claudot Hawad, Dayak and Ramir. [6] According to Prasse, when Algeria, Mali and Niger became independent, the groups in power after independence "wished to prevent the Tuareg from becoming a dominant force in their respective countries" (p. 52). In the past thirty years, Tuareg country has been divided between many nations (Libya, Algeria, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria), and the Tuareg are now part of pluri-ethnic societies and are minorities within each one (Bernus 1993: pp. 163-164). The droughts of 1969, 1973, 1980 and 1985 also forced many Tuareg to emigrate to Algeria, to Burkina Faso, to Nigeria and to Libya. Today, the large number of Tuareg in refugee camps and political reprisals have led to tension and unrest. Although there have been several attempts at peaceful negotiations between Tuareg resistance movements and the governments of Mali and Niger, the situation remains unresolved (pp. 63-67).

The last section, "Origins and Early History of the Tuareg," suggests the Tuareg and the Mauritians are descendant of Berbers who were driven south by advancing Arabs (p. 69). Tuareg origin myths relate the Tuareg to Lemtuna, the ancestress of the Berbers who lived around Ghadames in Tripolitania (Nicolaisen 1963: p. 405). Another myth relates the Tuareg to the legendary Queen Tin Hinan who came to Abalessa in the Ahaggar region from Taflelt in Morocco (p. 69). According to Prasse, these legends suggest the Tuareg of Southern Algeria

came from Libya and from Morocco, and the Kel Ayr and Kel Geres have Libyan origins. Tuareg from Mali claim to have come from Morocco or Mauritania (p. 71). Tuareg society has always been characterized by rivalry between groups, and in time different groups have enjoyed supremacy over others (p. 72). When the French arrived in the Hoggar they were met with great resistance and peace was reached in 1917. It lasted until independence in 1960. The French let the Tuareg continue their nomadic lifestyles; however, they saw to it that no concentration of power emerged (p. 80). Although the French did think of setting up an independent Tuareg state, the idea never materialized (p. 80).

The Tuaregs: The Blue People was originally written in Danish and directed at a Scandinavian audience. This is because Scandinavian countries have ongoing aid projects in Mali and in Niger in Tuareg areas, and the author's purpose is to convey information on the situation in both countries. This translation is intended as a brief and easily accessible English introduction to the subject (p. 7).

While the author does list all of his major sources for history and social organization in the bibliography, these are not cited in the text. Although the book is very general in nature, and most of the information contained in it is easily accessible, it would have been particularly appropriate to reference sources when discussing recent political issues, as there are very opposing opinions on the subject.[7]

The book includes twenty-five black and white and sixteen color photographs and two maps which add nicely to the general body of the text. Some are recent field photographs taken by Ingrid Poulsen in 1991 and 1993, and others are from archives. It is unfortunate that these photographs are never mentioned in the book. It would have been helpful if the captions had included dates and more precise information, particularly the early photographs which might be used as relevant and historical data.[8] Finally, some areas mentioned in the text (such as Tidikelt, p. 20) are not shown in the maps, which would be useful to those not familiar with these areas.

These remarks are not meant to take away from the general merit of the volume. *The Tuaregs: The Blue People* is a well organized and thoughtful book. It outlines the major aspects of Tuareg culture and life. While most of this information has already appeared in different publications and in other languages, the author should be complimented for producing a concise English volume on

the subject. The text will prove useful to scholars in the humanities and the social sciences as a general introductory text.

Notes:

[1]. As with many nomadic peoples, it is extremely difficult to give exact statistics for the Tuareg groups. See Claudot-Hawad and Hawad, 1996, p. 11 for comments on this subject.

[2]. Most Tuareg refer to their group or federation name. To speak about Tuareg from Mali or Niger, etc., is historically out of character and began after independence. See Claudot Hawad, 1993, pp. 111-112.

[3]. Mahmoudan Hawad, a Tuareg author and poet, is developing and using a cursive form of *tifinagh* inscriptions.

[4]. See Claudot Hawad (ed.), 1991 for articles by M.A. Ag Ataher Insar (pp. 91-97), M. Gast (pp. 99-111), E. Ag Foni (pp. 113-121) on the literacy campaigns.

[5]. Prasse notes the most famous missionary was Charles de Foucauld who published a dictionary of the Ahaggar form of *Tamashegh*, which was an important contribution to the analysis of the Tuareg language (p. 36).

[6]. For further reading and diverse opinions on this subject see Edmond Bernus, "Les Touareg," pp. 162-171 in *Vallees du Niger*, Paris: Editions de la Reunion des Musees Nationaux, 1993; Andre Bourgeot, *Les Societes Touaregues*, Nomadisme, Identite, Resistances, Paris: Karthala, 1995; Helene Claudot-Hawad, ed., *Touaregs: Exil et Resistance. Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Mediterranee* No. 57, Aix en Provence: Edisud, 1991; Claudot-Hawad, *Touaregs, Portrait en Fragments*, Aix en Provence: Edisud, 1993; Helene and Hawad Claudot-Hawad, *Touaregs: Voix Solitaires sous l'Horizon Confisque*, *Ethnies-Documents* No. 20-21, Hiver, 1996; Mano Dayak, *Touareg: La Tragedie*, Paris: Editions Lattes, 1992; Sylvie Ramir, *Les Pistes de l'Oubli: Touaregs au Niger*, Paris: Editions du Felin, 1991.

[7]. In the Preface, the author states he has "regular contacts with Tuaregs in Niger, with exiled Tuareg in Paris and with French scholars... and receive[s] personal viewpoints and excerpts from the French press, especially *Le Monde*" (p. 8), but these are not cited in the text.

[8]. For example, there are three photographs of Nicolaisen's which probably date from the 1960s. In ad-

dition, there are eight photographs by O. Olufsen which are of historical interest. O. Olufsen was a Danish geographer who organized an expedition to the Sahara in 1922-1923. He returned with a collection of objects collected in the Hoggar region of Algeria, which J. Nicolaisen published in his thesis entitled *Ecology and Culture*

of the Pastoral Tuaregs (Copenhagen, 1963).

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